

FAMILY

The Concept Creep of ‘Emotional Labor’

The term has become a central part of an important conversation about the division of household work. But the sociologist who coined it says it’s being used incorrectly.

By Julie Beck



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NOVEMBER 26, 2018

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Here are some of the ways that the term *emotional labor* has recently been defined:

In *The New York Times*: “The duties that are expected of you, but go unnoticed.”

In a guide to emotional labor for men, in *Mel Magazine*: “Free, invisible work women do to keep track of the little things in life that, taken together, amount to the big things in life: the glue that holds households, and by extension, proper society, together.”

And, most prominently, in a new book by Gemma Hartley, titled *Fed Up: Emotional Labor, Women, and the Way Forward*, based on her viral *Harper's Bazaar* article of last year:

Emotional labor, as I define it, is emotion management and life management combined. It is the unpaid, invisible work we do to keep those around us comfortable and happy. It envelops many other terms associated with the type of care-based labor I described in my article: emotion work, the mental load, mental burden, domestic management, clerical labor, invisible labor.

The term hasn't always been used this way. It was first coined by the sociologist Arlie Hochschild in her 1983 book on the topic, *The Managed Heart*. Emotional labor, as she conceived it, referred to the work of managing one's own emotions that was required by certain professions. Flight attendants, who are expected to smile and be friendly even in stressful situations, are the canonical example. In recent years, the term's popularity has grown immensely—[Google searches for it are up](#), and it's being mentioned more and more in [books](#) and [academic articles](#).

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Many people who write about emotional labor do tip their hats to Hochschild, and acknowledge that they are expanding her original definition, but the umbrella of emotional labor has grown so large that it's starting to cover things that make no sense at all, such as regular household chores, which are not emotional so much as they are labor, full stop. "Really, I'm horrified," Hochschild said of the concept creep when I called her to set the record straight.

One of the biggest shifts is that much of the conversation about emotional labor has left its original sphere of the workplace and moved to the home. It's been used to refer to everything from keeping mental to-do lists to writing Christmas cards to remembering to call your in-laws on their birthdays, and to express indignation that most of these things, most of the time, are done by women, without men realizing it. There's no doubt that the unpaid, expected, and unacknowledged work of keeping households and relationships running smoothly falls disproportionately on women. But that doesn't make it emotional labor. Organizing to-do lists and planning family Christmases are just labor.

I spoke with Hochschild about what is and isn't emotional labor, and what gets lost when the conversation around it gets vague and murky. An edited and condensed transcript of our conversation is below.

Julie Beck: Could you lay out in your own words how you define the term *emotional labor*?

Arlie Hochschild: Emotional labor, as I introduced the term in *The Managed Heart*, is the work, for which you're paid, which centrally involves trying to feel the right feeling for the job. This involves evoking and suppressing feelings. Some jobs require a lot of it, some a little of it. From the flight attendant whose job it is to be nicer than natural to the bill collector whose job it is to be, if necessary, harsher than natural, there are a variety of jobs that call for this. Teachers, nursing-home attendants, and child-care workers are examples. The point is that while you may also be doing physical labor and mental labor, you are crucially being hired and monitored for your capacity to manage and produce a feeling.

Beck: Since the time you coined it, have you noticed the term becoming more popular? How is its use expanding?

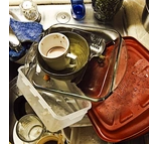
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Hochschild: It is being used to apply to a wider and wider range of experiences and acts. It's being used, for example, to refer to the enacting of to-do lists in daily life—pick up the laundry, shop for potatoes, that kind of thing. Which I think is an overextension. It's also being applied to perfectionism: You've absolutely *got* to do the perfect Christmas holiday. And that can be a confusion and an overextension. I do think that managing anxiety associated with obligatory chores is emotional labor. I would say that. But I don't think that common examples I could give are necessarily emotional labor. It's very blurry and over-applied.



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Beck: Are you comfortable with that expanding definition? Language evolves, right? Do you think that's a fine way for people to be using this term, or do you have concerns about it?

Hochschild: It makes the thinking a little blurrier. On the whole, I love the idea that people are exploring the realm, and so I welcome that, but I guess I don't like the blurriness of the thinking.

One thing that I read said even the work of calling the maid to clean the bathtub is too much. It's burdensome. I felt there is really, in this work, no social-class perspective. There are many more maids than there are people who find it burdensome to pick up the telephone to ask them to clean your tub.

Beck: Could we just do a quick lightning round of: Are these things emotional labor, yes or no?

Hochschild: Sure.

Beck: Is it emotional labor to remember all the chores that need to get done and remind people to do them?

Hochschild: Not in itself. I think that's mental labor. If there's some management of anxiety about forgetting something, that's the emotional-labor part of it.

Beck: Is it emotional labor to ask your husband to do the chores in a nice way so it doesn't hurt his feelings?

Hochschild: Depends on how she feels to begin with. It could be effortless: “Hey, sweetheart, can you handle Thursday?” “Sure, it’s on my list.” That’s not emotional labor.

Beck: I think this gets to perhaps a main confusion that is happening. I often see emotional labor referred to as the management of *other people’s* emotions, or doing things so that other people stay happy and stay comfortable. Is that emotional labor or no?

Hochschild: There’s a distinction to be made about the purpose of a task. Suppose the purpose of the task was to make your mother-in-law happy, and you’re paying a visit. You get in the cab, you ring the doorbell—that’s not emotional labor. But if your mother-in-law is extremely disapproving of you, and in the first five minutes you

become aware of that again, and you're having to defend your self-esteem against the perceived insult, that's emotional labor.

Beck: Is it emotional labor to be the one at work who is expected to plan the after-work happy hours and social gatherings for the office?

Hochschild: That is mental work. Important mental work, and it can crowd out attention to other kinds of work. But it's only emotional work if it's disturbing for you.

Beck: Is it emotional labor when you try to say your ideas in a meeting in a nonthreatening way?

Hochschild: Not unless it is experienced as anxiety-provoking or fear-evoking to you.

Beck: I'm going to dig into this one just slightly more. This is something that people talk about a lot. There's a sort of internalized expectation for women in the workplace that they not be too assertive, not too threatening to men, or just play nicely with others. Is that internalized expectation, and the forming of yourself to fit that expectation, emotional labor?

Hochschild: I love attention to this, but we need to be precise about it. If in the course of asserting yourself you find that you are having to brace yourself against

imagined criticisms, or people are looking disapproving and you realize your job may be in jeopardy, all of that bracing and anticipation and experience of anxiety I would count as yes, emotional labor. But it's not welded into the task itself.

Beck: Is it emotional labor to manage household Christmas merriment, such as sending Christmas cards, baking cookies, and planning family get-togethers?

Hochschild: There seems an alienation or a disenchantment of acts that normally we associate with the expression of connection, love, commitment. Like "Oh, what a burden it is to pick out gifts for the holiday for my children." Or "Oh, it's so hard to call a photographer to do family Christmas photos, and then to send it to my parents." I feel a strong need to point out that this isn't inherently an alienating act. And something's gone haywire when it is. It's okay to feel alienated from the task of making a magical experience for your very own children. I'm not just judging that. I'm saying let's take it as a symptom that something's wrong. I think a number of my books speak to that. *The Time Bind* says, wait a minute, what if home has become work and work has become home?

Males not participating fully in that; that's a problem, too. But in a sense, a family is a shock absorber of the trends that are bearing down on it, and in *The Second Shift* I argued that one of those trends bearing down on it is that women are forced to change faster than men are forced to change. Women have had to go into the labor force to compensate for declining wages of men. We think of these as sheerly family issues, but they're not sheerly family issues. They're a symptom of something bigger.

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The workforce becomes family-like for a lot of people. You get all your rewards at work, you get help in trying to be the person you want to be at work and not at home. I'm not just saying, "Oh, how terrible to think making a magical experience is alienated work." I'm saying, "Well, why has it become alienated work?" The solution is not for men and women to share alienated work. The solution is for men and women to share enchanted work. These are expressions of love.

Beck: Is it emotional labor to be the one in a couple who always RSVPs to party invites, and makes sure you call your family members often enough, and remembering birthdays?

Hochschild: Not inherently. It can be, if you're feeling that burdened and resentful and you're managing your resentment. One of the consequences of living in this age is what I call a stalled revolution. It is this uneven rate of change for men and women. One of the tragic effects of a stalled revolution is many women cannot afford the luxury of unambivalent love for their husbands.

Beck: Is it emotional labor if you are the person in the friend group who people keep turning to for advice or help solving their problems?

Hochschild: It can be emotional labor you love. I've written an essay, "Can Emotional Labor Be Fun?" And the answer is yes, if it's not a broken care system. If you're the one that people are turning to for advice, chances are you're good at giving advice. Chances are you're gratified at being able to help people, and there's nothing inherently alienating about being such a person. Do I want people to lean on me less? No, I don't.

Beck: Okay, so that was the lightning round. Thank you for doing that. It's interesting because it seems like people are trying to have an important conversation

about the work that women are expected to do outside of their jobs, about the way they have to smooth social interactions, or sometimes it's about having to remember all this stuff for the household, or sometimes in the office. Or about just chores? And all of these things are getting kind of smooshed together and being called emotional labor, as far as I can tell.

Hochschild: I agree. We're trying to have an important conversation but having it in a very hazy way, working with [a] blunt concept. I think the answer is to be more precise and careful in our ideas and to bring this conversation into families and to the office in a helpful way.

If you have an important conversation using muddy ideas, you cannot accomplish your purpose. You won't be understood by others. And you won't be clear to yourself. That's what's going on. It'd be like going to a bad therapist—"Well, just try to have a better day tomorrow." You're doing the right thing, you're seeking help, but you're not getting clarification and communicating clearly. It can defeat the purpose; it can backfire.

Beck: It seems like this is mostly becoming a popular term in feminist conversations. But if we talk about all the unpaid labor women do in the home as “emotional labor,” we’re insinuating that any kind of labor that falls most often to a woman is “emotional.” It almost seems like we’re saying that women do the work and women are emotional, so that must be emotional work. Like chores are just labor. Writing Christmas cards is just labor. If we’re talking about the division of labor in the household, and we start calling chores “emotional labor”—

Hochschild: It’s inherently, then, a female thing. It’s feminizing, in a way, these things that should be described in a more gender-neutral way.

Beck: Do you have any advice or thoughts on a better way to have this conversation?

Hochschild: Added to a feminist concern for equity—not taking that away, adding to it—we need to add clarity about our social-class position and explore the idea of alienation. When things stop being meaningful and fun. Let’s not just sweep that

aside, because I don't think it's a solution if both husband and wife are now 50-50 with alienated labor. There's a fantasy that equity will be a solution. I'm adding a concern about why things don't feel fun for both of them. I think we need the clarity of an important conversation about what are the circumstances that make family life so hard.
